

The Built Environment and Community Participation for Adults Aging with Physical Disability: A Scoping Review

Background

The term “built environment” refers to the human-made features of spaces where people live and work. Barriers in the built environment can hinder participation in community activities for people aging with long-term physical disability.

To learn more about how the built environment affects community participation for this population, we did a scoping review of the literature.

The Review

We searched for peer-reviewed studies of adults aging with long-term physical disability that addressed community participation and built environments. We found 21 studies that fit our criteria.

Studies used a variety of approaches, including self-report surveys, qualitative surveys, GPS data, photo journals, and formal accessibility audits. Studies used varying definitions of participation and the built environment.

Data analysis revealed three broad themes

- The built environment as a barrier to participation in meaningful community activities
- Effects of the built environment on mobility and one's ability to travel to various activities
- Unwelcome/negative messages sent by inaccessible environments

Studies also described beneficial aspects of the built environment, such as:

- Smooth travel surfaces
- Curb cuts
- Well maintained sidewalks
- Safe street crossings
- Pleasing neighborhood appearances



Conclusion

Findings from this review show that barriers in the built environment affect community participation for people aging with disability. Studies we reviewed used varying definitions and ways of measuring both “community participation” and “built environment.” Researchers should use consistent measures and definitions of these concepts. Results of this review may inform future interventions and research approaches.

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